

## THE PRESENT OUTLOOK IN THEOLOGY.

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I am to speak to you of "The Present Outlook in Theology". The theme itself implies that we live in a changeful time, and that we need to define our relation to the movements of thought around us. No one will deny that the ideas of development and evolution have taken fast hold of the modern mind, and have greatly influenced both Biblical and theological investigation. I am inclined to concede much to these views, and to believe that when evolution is regarded as God's ordinary method of revelation, it throws valuable light upon many problems that are otherwise insoluble. A theistic evolution is simply the doctrine that God builds the future upon the past, that later revelations are prepared for by the earlier. As our Lord used to make wine, and took five loaves and two fishes as the basis of his feeding the multitude, so natural law, as far as it will go, is respected in God's communications of knowledge. Truth is gradually communicated, both to the individual and to the race. We receive the divine fulness in installments, "a penny a day" and "grace for grace". God is not shut up to merely external revelation; he can reveal himself within the soul as well as without—"it pleased God to reveal his Son in me", says Paul. God is not shut up to working on isolated individuals; he can move the heart of a whole nation as easily as the heart of its chosen leaders; he makes himself known in history as well as in Scripture. God is not shut up to a single nation as the recipient of his enlightening influences; nowhere has he left himself without a witness; the progress of the race is not a merely naturalistic progress; all real advance in science and philosophy is due to God's teaching. The sunflower reaches upward to the sun, but it is the sun that draws it upward; and it was the Sun of Righteousness, the immanent Christ, who, before the

incarnation as well as after, was God's one and only\* Revealer, the Way, the Truth and the Life of men.

I therefore feel free to accept all that the Higher Criticism can prove with regard to the origin and development of Scripture and all that modern science can prove with regard to the origin and development of man, believing that this evolution is a theistic evolution, with Christ as its agent and goal. The word evolution, however, has to some minds a sinister sound, as if it necessarily implied a purely automatic and necessary development. While I claim for it a Christian use and meaning, I cannot deny that there are not wanting in our day professedly Christian teachers who so emphasize the element of change in the history of doctrine, that all permanence is virtually denied. Because we are in process of development, both in body and soul, development is regarded as the law of universal being, and is unhesitatingly attributed even to him whom the Scriptures declare to be without variation or shadow of turning. There is no such thing as objective truth, it is said, and both ethical and religious doctrine are impossible, because both are in constant flux. Even Christ and Christianity are held to be merely temporary phases of evolution, and both may be outgrown. Views of this sort seem to me, not necessary correlates, but rather needless exaggerations and inexcusable perversions, of a sober theory of evolution. I maintain that they have no foundation either in reason or in Scripture. I can best depict the present outlook in our seminary instruction, and the dangers that beset our theology, by criticising this mistaken evolutionism, and by showing, in spite of its grain of truth, that it is bad metaphysics, bad ethics and bad theology.

It is bad metaphysics. It is the revival of the Heraclitic philosophy. Heraclitus of Ephesus, who lived five hundred years before Christ, could see nothing in the universe but constant change. He maintained that there is no such thing as permanent being—the only actuality is an everlasting becoming. All things flow, he said. Modern phenomenologists have adopted this philosophy, and have furnished it with a score of illustrations from physical science. The rainbow is no fixed entity, but an ever-changing reflection from successive falling

water-drops. The wave of the sea has no lateral movement—it is simply an alternate elevation and depression of particles that make no advance with the wind which impels them. The musical note has no substantive existence—it is the result of a continuous series of vibrations, and these vibrations are changing at every instant. The flame of the lamp, the growth of the tree, but above all, the continuity of the human body, are all instances of a flux of particles, which makes upon us an impression of permanence, while at the same time the so-called permanence is an illusion, created by our short-sighted imaginations.

And we must grant that this philosophy is plausible, so long as we confine our attention to physical nature. The defect and fault of it is just here—it starts out from physical nature and makes that the rule for the whole world, whereas it ought to start out from the soul of man, which knows and dominates physical nature. In the soul of man we find something abiding. Here is a personal identity, which subsists through change and in spite of change. This personal identity, and not man's changing thoughts or the flux of particles in his body, should give us the key to the physical universe around us. Arguing from ourselves, we can see in the world of nature the operation of intelligence and will, none the less personal because it is regular. The regularities of nature are the activities of a personal being—yes, the habits of God—and all the changes of the world have behind them the presence and power of the unchangeable one.

The Heraclitic philosophy of change is true, only when supplemented by the Eleatic philosophy of permanence. The philosophy of becoming has its little grain of truth; impersonal reality, taken by itself, has nothing in it that is abiding; the plant and the brute are its models, and they are mere successions of varying states. But if we stop here and confine our attention to mere physical things, we shall have a materialism that is exalted to include man and to exclude God; for there is no place in it either for man's personal identity or for God's free will. To save these great interests, we must add to the philosophy of becoming the philosophy of being; we must be

Eleatics as well as Heraclitics. Not all reality is impersonal; noumenal and ontological reality is personal; and personal reality can have varying states and yet remain the same. Even the world of matter needs a permanent conscious self to explain it. Unless there be something abiding, there can be no becoming. The very conception of change, if the change be not capricious and useless, implies a law behind the phenomena, and an end to which the phenomenal process leads. In order to rational progress, this law must be intelligent and benevolent, as it can only be if it is the expression of a righteous mind and will. Nor can any becoming be observed unless there be an abiding intelligence in the observer. Only when I stand on the rock apart from the stream, can I see the rush of the water flowing by. So, in a true metaphysics, becoming is bound up with being. Development? Yes, but there must *be* something to develop; there must be some *law* of development; there must be some *end* to be secured by development. The two ideas, of change on the one hand and of permanence on the other, are inseparable as the inside and outside of a curve, or as the positive and the negative poles of a magnet. The grievous error of this modern overstatement of evolutionism is that it divorces the phenomenal from the noumenal, makes bodily change a rule for the soul, makes science as vain as the cat's pursuit of its own tail, turns the universe into a medley of accidents, without law and without God.

This philosophy of becoming is bad ethics, as well as bad metaphysics. It gives us the ethics of Pragmatism. It claims that "the true is the expedient in the way of our thinking, as the right is the expedient in the way of our behaving". The conception of an object is simply the conception of its future, its results, its use. There is a grain of truth here. The conception of an object does *include* an awareness of practical consequences. Truth and right have results, and are proved by their results to be truth and right. But the proof of a thing is not the thing itself. The error of Pragmatism is that it regards truth and right as meaning only what we can make by them. It holds that truth and right are simply what works well. An idea is true when it carries with it valuable results.

An act is right which has happy consequences. This is utilitarianism, taking the place in ethics which belongs to objective truth and righteousness. It deprives us of any *standard* of truth or of right, except this, that it makes a difference in practice whether we recognize them or not. It denies that there is any intuitive perception of difference between right and wrong. As the other so-called intuitions are generalizations from experience, so this one is merely a racial calculation of self-interest. Conduct is right because it is useful, not useful because it is right. A great modern authority has told us that Swedenborgianism is materialism, with the nails clinched on the inside. Modern Pragmatism seems to be a survival of such materialism. The right is whatever succeeds in asserting and maintaining itself, which is much the same as saying that might makes right. Conscience is only ripened expediency, and altruism is only egoism perfected. This perverse evolutionism holds that consequences not only *indicate* truth and right, but that they *constitute* truth and right. It is an outgrowth of the sensational philosophy, which holds that as the world consists of sensations, so the soul consists of states of consciousness—thoughts without a thinker, psychology without a soul, a string of beads without any string. Nietzsche and Isben and Bernard Shaw profess this same philosophy, when they say the golden rule is that there is no golden rule.

Ethics of this sort is like the play of Hamlet with the part of Hamlet left out. To say that right is only a becoming, that it exists only in process, that it consists only in useful moral results, is really to deny that there is any such thing as morality. For our whole moral nature is so constituted that we judge certain acts or states to be right, according as they conform to some previously accepted standard. Belief in the existence of objective right, and in our obligation to do the right is born with us, even though our conceptions of what *is* right may change. The sense of duty is prior to the experience of consequences: we are compelled to decide what we will do in any given case, without waiting to see whether our action will have good results—in fact, doing the right is often required in scorn

of results, as when one tells the truth at cost of contumely, or witnesses for Christ at risk of a martyr's death. Is it said that this, too, is a necessary phase of evolution, and that the fittest survives? I reply that in *moral* evolution it is for each man to determine what *is* fittest; as another has phrased it, we and our ideals are factors, not products, of evolution; will explains evolution, not evolution will; we determine evolution, and evolution does not determine us. In other words, we are persons, and not things; conscious selves, not mere streams of consciousness; free beings, not waifs borne hither and thither on the current of circumstance, as a deterministic philosophy would have it. The Hindu Vivekananda indeed regards all of us as mere shifting phases of the infinite, for he said to his Boston audience: "There is not a person in this room; we are not persons." But we know better than this. Back of the stream of consciousness, we know that there is an abiding self; over that abiding self we recognize an unchanging moral law; that unchanging moral law is an expression of the nature of God. We can add to our faith virtue, only because God has called us by his own glory and virtue. "By their fruits ye shall know them," says Christ. But that is very different from making the fruits of virtue to be the only virtue, in Heaven or earth. To make truth and right the mere product of our changing circumstances, identical with the ascertained usefulness of our thinking and action, is to deny that there is any truth or right that has objective and eternal validity, to deprive moral life of its sanctions, and to cut up ethics by the roots. Moral progress is impossible, since there is no definite end to which progress can lead. Unless there is a heavenly perfection as our guide and goal, our efforts after righteousness are as useless as the gyrations of a squirrel in the treadmill of its cage.

This philosophy of becoming is as bad theology as it is bad metaphysics and bad ethics. It is a thorough-going Agnosticism, for it regards all religious ideas as simply creations of man, and as destined in time to be supplanted and to pass away. Here, too, is a grain of truth. There is progress in theology, just as there is in astronomy. But that does not mean that there is change in the objective truth, but only that there is

change in our apprehensions of the truth. Progress in astronomy is not man's creation of new planets; it is man's discovery of planets that were never seen before, or man's bringing to light of relations between them that were never before suspected. So progress in theology is only man's growing knowledge of God's unchanging truth. There are no new planets, and there are no new books of the Bible, but our understanding of both is improving from day to day. Through this progressive understanding of nature and of Scripture the eternal God is revealing himself. There is no danger that two and two will ever make five, in this or in any future world—and why? Because this mathematical intuition is the revelation of a fact in the being of God. That virtue is praiseworthy and vice condemnable, that love is a duty and that selfishness is wrong—these statements are not conclusions of experience or of argument, they are utterances of our moral nature. Conscience in men, declaring that right must be done though the heavens fall, is the reflection of the unchangeable holiness of God. And this is the meaning of Ecclesiastes, when it tells us that "he hath set eternity in their heart".

This unchangeable element in religion, the philosophy of development would abolish. Man, it says, creates his own gods, and his gods like himself must change and die. Man makes God in his own image, and God himself is in an endless process of becoming. It belongs to the very nature of the absolute to grow. The process is wholly internal to the nature of man; God is immanent, but not transcendent. God never speaks, for God is only the growing product of man's intelligence. There is no God who could possibly reveal himself to man; there is no revelation of unchanging and eternal truth; there is no Messiah but man's ever-advancing ideals; the Bible, like the sacred books of India and Persia, represents only the temporary gropings of the human spirit after an ever-flying goal. Christ and Christianity, instead of being a final revelation, may in some distant day be as far behind the times as Judaism now is to us. And so, upon the altar of the merely temporal, is sacrificed all that gives to the temporal its meaning and value—and that is the eternal. God's reaching down to man in incarnation and

atonement gives place to man's vain reaching upward to an impersonal and unknown spirit of the universe, that ever eludes his grasp and yet ever lures him on.

Though an angel from Heaven should preach to us this new Gospel, we must call it an apostasy from the Christian faith. For Christ is the same, yesterday, and today, and forever; and while heaven and earth shall pass away, his words shall not pass away. It is not only an apostasy from the Christian faith, but it is a surrender of even natural religion. Man's intuitions are God's tuitions, and unless we hold to their incontestable authority, we have no God and no certainty of any kind whatever. Truth, beauty, goodness, are meaningless unless there is an immutable standard of truth, beauty, goodness, in God. Unless perfection is something definite and attainable, there can be no striving after it, either in knowledge or in conduct. The Scripture declares that eternal life consists in the knowledge of God, and that, as we now know in part, we shall one day know as we are known. The theory we combat destroys all possibility of such knowledge, and it renders theology as hopeless as the boy's search for the pot of gold at the foot of the rainbow. It destroys all belief in personal responsibility; for without a divine rule of conduct there is no responsibility. It destroys all hope of personal immortality; for without a divine support and goal for the individual life, no personal immortality is conceivable. How different is this doctrine from the teaching of our Lord: "I go to prepare a place for you; because I live, ye shall live also." Nay, how different is it from the teachings of purely natural religion, for that can look up to an unchanging God and can promise rest for the weary soul in him. How sweet and solemn is Edmund Spenser's "Canto of Mutability":

"Then 'gin I think on that which nature said,  
 Of that same time when no more change shall be,  
 But steadfast rest of all things, firmly stayed  
 Upon the pillars of Eternity;  
 For all that moveth doth in change delight;  
 But henceforth all shall rest eternally



With him that is the God of Sabaoth high;  
Oh, thou great Sabaoth God, grant me that Sabbath's  
sight!"

Where does this apostasy from the Christian faith begin, and where does it end? It begins in the refusal to accept Christ's word as law. Knowledge of doctrine depends upon obedience to the truth already revealed. Take Jesus at his word, believe that he is with you always, pray to him for the teaching and guidance of his Holy Spirit; in other words, take Christ for your Master, and you shall be led into all the truth. Do the advocates of the new theology pray to Jesus? Do they pray at all, with faith in a personal God who hears and answers prayer? Have they not lost the sense of sin and need, which once led them to prostrate themselves at the feet of that ever-living Savior who said: "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest"? Have they not failed to take his yoke upon them, and so have failed to learn of him? He would have increased their faith, instead of allowing it to evaporate. He would have shown that the Christ of John's Gospel, with its Logos doctrine and its propitiatory suffering of a divine Savior, is absolutely needed to make intelligible the declarations of the Synoptics; for in the Synoptic Gospels the human Christ bids the whole race of man come to him and take upon them his yoke, claims to be their final judge, promises his own omnipresence with his people, and, in prospect of all this, gives his life as their ransom from guilt and sheds his blood for the remission of their sins.

There *is* a theology of becoming, to which we may justly hold. It is such a becoming as Jesus predicted when he declared that the Holy Spirit would lead his followers into the truth which before resurrection and Pentecost they could not receive. But, instead of such progress toward truth, we are pointed to a backward evolution which does little credit to the theory. Had God so little care for the work of Christ that he suffered it to be misrepresented and perverted, so soon as Jesus died? Here is the absurdity of this exaggerated evolutionism: Forgetting that the historical Christ is not the whole Christ,

and that the Synoptics show us only what he "began to do and to teach", it would ascertain the real truth by going back from Paul and John to the three Gospels. Even then it must purge the narrative of all its supernatural elements, so that it may present to us not a divine Savior, but only a human teacher and example, fallible and imperfect like the rest of us. The virgin-birth of Christ must be denied, even at the expense of Mary's purity, or of the evangelist's veracity. With the new creation of humanity at the birth of Jesus, there disappears all faith in any new birth of the individual Christian under the influence of the Holy Spirit; regeneration and conversion become only names for a gradual development of the powers in religious education. And if we can dispense with a personal God in incarnation and in regeneration, why can we not dispense with a personal God in man's original creation? Neither beginning, middle nor end shall be supernatural. To this pantheistic or atheistic conclusion such philosophy inevitably leads. The personal God, as was said of Auguste Comte's philosophy, is conducted to the frontier, and is bowed out of his universe, with thanks for his provisional services.

This *facilis descensus Averno* is impossible to any who cling to the living Christ. The abyss of skepticism to which this philosophy leads should warn us against taking the first steps in the path of error. The Christ of John's Gospel is required to vindicate the truthfulness of the Synoptics. Only Christ's deity can explain his perfect humanity. The pitiful spectacle of the man who has outgrown Christ, and who picks flaws in his Redeemer, ought to teach us how self-exalting and self-deceiving is sin. Unbelief is progressive and cumulative. The deity and the atonement of Christ are the two towers of the Christian citadel—you cannot hold the outworks when you surrender the citadel to the foe. Education which ignores these fundamentals of the Gospel is not Christian education. The philosophy of mere becoming gives us a false metaphysics, a false ethics and a false theology. Unless there be an abiding reality back of all change, an abiding right back of all action, an abiding deity back of all our conceptions of him, life is but a succession of pictures on the screen, and faith is only the

child's notion that the pictures are reality. Truth and right are possible, because God is truth and right, and can make himself known to his finite creatures. He has made himself known in Jesus Christ. He that is of God hears Christ's words, as Christ utters them in Scripture. The Holy Spirit bears witness to their truth, and in this testimony of the Holy Spirit, as the Reformers taught, we have the final proof of inspiration. These wonderful words of life are self-evidencing, and they are the power of God unto salvation. By his Word and his Spirit, Christ is made to us wisdom and justification and sanctification and redemption. And so the living, personal, present Christ is the interpreter and the guarantee of God's whole revelation. Many things shall be shaken, but he shall abide, Immanuel, God with us. As he is himself the Rock of Ages, he joins unstable man to himself so that they become a rock upon which he can build a church against which the gates of hell cannot prevail.

To him we pray with the poet:

“O living Will, that shalt endure  
When all that seems shall suffer shock,  
Rise in the spiritual rock,  
Flow through our deeds, and make them pure.”

The Christ, who thus speaks to us by his Spirit in Scripture, claims the absolute submission of all men, not, as President Eliot intimates, because he is a deified man, but rather because he is the humanized God, God manifest in the flesh, the atoning and redeeming Deity, the Creator, Upholder, and Governor of the universe, the object of prayer, the Judge of the living and the dead. No mere historic fame and influence are his, but an eternal rulership and an absolute supremacy. No longer *becoming*, as in the days of his earthly life, but *being*, he exercises an unchangeable priesthood, and no man can come to the Father but through him. He who has seen him has seen the Father; all men are to honor the Son as they honor the Father; whosoever denieth the Son hath not the Father. Let us not crucify the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame.

Especially let our theological seminaries, founded as they were to train preachers of Christ's Gospel, beware of admitting to places of instruction men who are Heraclitics in metaphysics, Pragmatists in ethics and Agnostics in theology.

May the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary guard that which is committed to it, turning away from the profane babblings and oppositions of the knowledge, which is falsely so called, which some professing have erred concerning the faith.